

Re-reading History through Feminist Lens: A Critical Study of Qurratulain Hyder's *The River of Fire*

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Abstract

The present paper intends a critical study of *The River of Fire* (1998), the cause célèbre of Qurratulain Hyder. While the narrative, in line with the tradition of typical historical novels, has a storyline parallel with the timeline of Indian history, the present paper intends to read the novel as subversion to this stereotypical presentation of history, as it produces a critique of the phallogocentric notion of history as Hyder restrained herself from delving into macrocosmic detailing of wars and invasions that history tends to detail. The paper will further analyze how in *The River of Fire*, she attempted to re-write history by including the microcosmic experiences of human beings, to be more precise, from the point of view of women and exposing the 'patriarchal politics of constriction, exclusion, and dispossession' (Kumar 92) that tend to marginalize women down the ages.

Key words: Qurratulain Hyder, subversion, critique, history, women, patriarchal politics.

The secular form of fictional narrative in Urdu made a late arrival in India. The earliest specimens had their origin in the exotic, supernatural fantasies of the Middle East and South Asia. While the didactic narratives of Nazir Ahmed heralded the dawn of the secular form of fictional narratives, the morning song was sung by Mirza Haadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jaan Ada* and Premchand's *Kafan* and *Godan*. These were followed by a large number of literary works of considerable merit by a group of writers who took the Urdu fiction out of its cradle stage. Qurratulain Hyder was one such figure who not only extended the thematic frontiers of the existing fictions and experimented freely with its craft and technique, but also imparted an intellectual and philosophical density.¹ A prolific writer Hyder extended her hand in almost every sphere of literature – short stories, novels, novelettes, and travelogues. The present paper is a critical

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study of her cause célèbre – *The River of Fire* (1998), the novel transcreeated/translated by the author herself from her Urdu text *Aag Ka Darya* (1959) after almost forty years of its publication. Interestingly, Hyder averted the idea of her work to be translated by others and translation/transcreation of her own literary works was one of her favourite occupations. Mehru Jaffar recollects:

The world knows how Annie Apa had disliked translators and liked to translate her writings in Urdu herself. In fact she forbade anyone who wanted to translate her work during her lifetime. . . Annie Apa did not approve of translators because she felt she alone was capable of translating her writing. She was the only one who was allowed freedom to translate, or to re-write as she was most familiar with the spirit of her own original work. Besides, Annie Apa seems to have simply enjoyed revisiting her writings to translate, to re-read and to rewrite things differently. She even wrote several versions of the same work when she felt like doing so.²

Expanding over almost twenty-five thousand years of Indian socio-political history, *The River of Fire* seems to be a historical novel in epic stature. The narrative opens at the fourth century BC, the rise of Maurya emperor, following the transition from the Lodi Dynasty to the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century, the consolidation of East India Company rule in the nineteenth century, culminating in the tempestuous period of Partition. While the narrative, in line with the tradition of typical historical novels, has a storyline that ‘runs parallel to Indian history,’³ the present paper intends to read the novel as subversion to this stereotypical presentation of history, as it produces a ‘strong critique of the received notion of history’⁴ as Hyder restrained herself from delving into macrocosmic detailing of wars and invasions that history tends to detail. Asif Farrukhi writes:

Her larger-than-life works of fiction managed to convey a feeling of history as lived experience. Her sense of history was unique as was her perception of time and in her fiction the great tide in the affairs of men becomes a powerful and living metaphor. *Aag Ka Darya*-literally the river of fire – was her

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most memorable creation. More than a partition novel, it portrays events that cast a long historical shadow and how history determines the fate of people.⁵

The paper will further analyze how in *The River of Fire*, she attempted to re-write history by including the microcosmic experiences of human beings, to be more precise, from the point of view of women and exposing the ‘patriarchal politics of constriction, exclusion, and dispossession’⁶ that tend to marginalize women down the ages.

Women, to be more precise, besieged and rebellious women have always been the dominant inhabitants of the fictional world of Hyder. For example, we can mention her landmark works like *Agle Janam Mohe Bitiya Na Keejo*, *Sita Haran*, that ‘reflect Hyder’s concern with conflicts of women from diverse societal groups and communities.’⁷ *The River of Fire* is also no exception. The female characters of this fictional world are far from being helpless victims at the hands of their male counterparts. Champa, the principal female protagonist of this novel flows along with the currents of the river of fire and appears with different names and identities at different periods throughout the novel. Nikhat Taj has read Champa as the epitome of ‘change and continuity of experience in Indian women.’⁸ He further adds:

[. . .] [o]f all the characters Champa is the only figure who is present in all the four episodes of the book. In every episode, she retains the enigmatic quality of her ‘self’. Differences in her person are subtilised into her name by minor inflexional changes: Champak—Prime Minister’s daughter (Ancient India), Champavati—pundit’s sister (Islamic India), Champa Jan—courtesan of Oudh (Colonial India), Champa Ahmad—educated, modern woman (pre and post-Independent India).⁹

Champak, in the inaugural section of the novel, is an inhabitant of the repressive, traditional, patriarchal world. Yet the patriarchal apparatuses have not been able to restrain her free spirit. Rather it is

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her quest for life that leads her into a 'journey – spanning centuries in the quest of knowledge, freedom, love, and power – is shown through a series of rebirths in various time periods in Indian history'¹⁰ and it makes her stand apart from the traditional heroines of great Indian epics who have renounced their worldly pleasures in favour of the patriarchs in their life only to receive 'contempt and distrust' in return. Even when her fiancé Hari Shankar prefers Buddhism over her and turns into a Buddhist *vikshu*, Champak refuses to give in. Her subsequent behaviour can be read as a complete subversion to the tradition of lovelorn epic heroines, who, deserted by their lovers spend their days in lamentations. Champak, instead of following their path, falls in love with another man, Gautam Nilambar, an abstemious artist, whom she met at a dance ceremony. Champak soon has to face the ordeals of life – she gets abducted along with the other women of her home town Ayodhya and is send off to the Mauryan dynasty headed by Chandragupta Maurya. There she is forced into an incompatible marriage with a hideous and old official of the Mauryan court. Gautam, on the other hand, renounced his austerity and became a member of a group of artists, only to come closer to Champak. But, it is her wifely duties and societal surveillance that become the major impediments to their way to union and Champak has to renounce her desire for Gautam and she utters the old proverbial line: 'The one who is awake one day will fall asleep and the one who is asleep shall awake one day.'¹¹ Rafiq interpreted this trope of 'awakening and slumbering and vice versa' to be 'symbolic of a woman's quest or journey from a lower consciousness to a higher consciousness that is analogous to the development of a character in *bildungsroman* novel.'¹²

The next section of the novel revolves around Champavati, a native girl from Ayodhya who is an embodiment of 'the female view of the world, which stands for harmony, love, and peace.'¹³ Sangari has found a resonance of Jaydeva's Radha in her, 'the ecstatic human soul "yearning to be one with the Divine, what the Sufis call Fana-fi-Allah."¹⁴ Champavati is in love with Kamaluddin, a valorous Arab

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soldier in Mughal court who finds joy in warfare. But Champavati, an ardent believer in peace and harmony wants him to renounce the path of violence and worship peace, only to be laughed at in return. But the self-reliant woman refuses to give in and marks of her ‘personal and spiritual’¹⁵ struggle become evident in returning to her feminine domain of home after Kamaluddin leaves her brokenhearted. But she soon gains her calm of mind and self-reliance back. Interestingly, Hyder has placed Champavati as a devotee of Shakti (the female self of creation), perhaps to indicate her being an incarnation of the female self of creation:

On a shelf near the door, a small statue of Bhavani was kept before which the smoke from an incense stick was rising in a thin quivering stream. Champa watched this peaceful atmosphere from the doorway and after drying her tears came through the door.¹⁶

When her lover Kamaluddin never returns to reciprocate her devotional love, Champavati decides to follow the path of spiritual love and choose the eternal lover Lord Krishna over any worldly lover, like Mirabai, with whom she shares an affinity. The association between her and Mirabai seem to be already in Hyder’s mind as she makes Champavati utter the following words: ‘If I was married to you in my previous janams, I’ll marry you now too . . . If my karma and sanskaras are such, I’ll become a Muslim and be your spouse’ (Hyder 178);¹⁷ these are words which have a direct affinity with Mirabai’s lines: ‘Our love is from a previous birth, my love’, ‘I, Mira, am yourself for birth after birth.’¹⁸

Champa, in the next section of the book appears as Champa Jan, a celebrated courtesan in Lucknow. Sangari has read her as a ‘civilizing figure’ like Umrao Jan, whose ‘salon [is] a space for refinement.’¹⁹ Gautam Nilambar reappears in this section retaining his name of previous birth. He serves the British East India Company as a clerk and falls in love with Champa Jan. But their love remains unrequited again, as Gautam leaves Champa and Lucknow. Here, in this section also, Champa appears to break the

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oppressive mould of patriarchy: Hyder has presented her as subversion to the dominant trope of the fictional narratives of that time – she is not ‘the “good” prostitute as a “wife” at heart in her loyalty and desire for legitimate conjugal love.’²⁰ She is neither a helpless creature nor a *femme fatale*. Rather she is a woman who has achieved admiration and patronage from patriarchy through her learning and intelligence:

By being in the role of a courtesan, Champa escapes the stronghold of social tradition which she experienced in earlier births and which made her subservient to men. She has the freedom to develop her personality in whichever direction she chooses.²¹

But for Gautam, she is nothing but a regular public woman and as a result, he refused to reciprocate her love. But Champa, on the other hand, does not cease to love him for a single moment. Materially ruined at the aftermath of the Revolution in 1857, Champa Jan, an old lady by now, has to adopt beggary at the railway station and she reaches the crescendo of her tragedy when she has to beg alms from the man who remains indifferent to her devotion and love. Gautam, again is not ready to lend Champa Jan any agency, as he did not do in their youth. But Champa Jan, retaining the dignified stature that she achieved in her youth, does not demand anything from him rather gives him her blessings and leaves him musing:

Where does Beauty go after it slides off the face of a lovely woman? Does old age turn women into a different species? Why are old men venerated and women ridiculed as hags? Why didn't I run after her and ask her to sit beside me in this carriage and take her home?²²

Rafiq has read this chauvinistic attitude of Gautam as a deliberate stance on the part of the writer herself, directed at exposing oppressive nature of patriarchy: ‘Through Gautam’s mindset the author shows the patriarchal attitude towards women that it is not the inner beauty of a woman that matters but her external appearance.’²³ In the first narrative also Gautam is smitten by the physical beauty of

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young Champak and finds similarity between her physical appearance and that of Aryani, the Goddess of the Woods. On witnessing a voluptuous statuette of a rural girl with the Kadam bough, he is reminded of Champak's physique: 'the plump, slender-waisted, broad-hipped girl who was bending the twig of the exotic tree, just as he had seen Champak do a few weeks ago' and called it 'Sudarshan Yakshini – Tree spirit, good to Behold.'²⁴ But when after the passage of a few years he met her at a theater in Patliputra, his disgust at middle-aged Champak's deformed physique resembles the attitude Gautam exhibits toward sold Champa Jan – he not only refuses to meet her but also reflects: 'meeting this fat, married woman' would shatter 'his own world of dreams.'²⁵ When Jamuna, Champak's messenger implores him to meet Champak for old time's sake, he arrogantly replies: 'My dear Jamuna, there are no old and new times. Only Eternity – which is also an instant.'²⁶ But Champak does not fail to see through the double standard of patriarchy as her reply reveals: 'the Supreme Truth – [it] is a profound misfortune to be reborn as a woman, especially since her beauty and youth have nothing to do with Eternity.'²⁷ Biswas has read this as an attempt at Hyder's part at 'squashing all arguments and explicitly critiquing the double standards regarding the perceived notion of beauty.'²⁸ This male gaze that objectifies women and their body has been interpreted by Jonathan Schroeder as 'the psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of gaze.'²⁹ Biswas has read this process of objectification as a mirror reflection of the 'androcentric' and 'male chauvinistic' character of the history of the Indian subcontinent.³⁰

The development in Champa's personality reaches its climax in the final section of the novel, where Champa appears as Champa Ahmed, a new woman who does not consider marriage to be her destiny, nor does she pay heed towards the regressive societal norms of virtue that society directs against its womenfolk. Gautam is not the sole target of her amorous heaving, rather she engages herself in amorous dalliances with a number of men, both married and single:

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with her friend Tehmina's fiancé Amir Reza, Cyril Ashley, Gautam, who desires his cousin Shanta, and Bill Craig, the man Shanta desires herself. The author puts her sense of agency as:

Suddenly something strange happened. Champa felt an inexplicable elation. There was freedom in the wind, joyous contentment was palpable in the rustling of the leaves. Did others also experience this sense of liberation? Poor Tehmina, for instance, or foolish Gautam?³¹

Rafiq explains: 'She experiences a sense of freedom that she had never experienced in previous birth and this freedom can be understood to love any man she chooses.'³² Though in her previous births, she has been deserted by the men she desired, here, it is she who is capricious, which is quite an 'unwomanly' character trait and generally associated with the male. Though at the initial stage of their relationship Gautam is not able to realize Champa's iconoclastic stances, as he was not able to understand Champa's love and dedication in his previous births, by the end of the novel he arrives at an understanding of her character as 'he realizes that the Champa whom he thought was always far behind was way ahead for she had found what her heart was seeking.'³³

Hyder has presented her female protagonists as complete subversions of the cult of womanhood prescribed by patriarchy. In her celebrated *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860* (1966), historian Barbara Welter identified four qualities that patriarchy prescribed for its womenfolk to follow: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. But the female protagonists inhabiting the fictional world of Hyder refused to follow these 'cults of domesticity.'³⁴ *The River of Fire*, a representative specimen of Hyder's oeuvre is also 'a [narrative of Champa's] quest to seek freedom and escape the confinements of "home," a quest for identity and a journey of evolution into the "new woman."³⁵ Champak in the first narrative is an intellectual woman who engages herself in cerebral debates with visiting scholars in the Mauryan court. Yet she cannot make the pursuit of knowledge her goal in life and excluded

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from the male domain of knowledge and experience she has to accept her fate dejectedly. When Gautam met her after some passage of years he does not get a glimpse of the headstrong, intellectual woman, rather the picture is of a domesticated mother figure with her child: ‘a prosperous housewife and mother. No longer an ideal or a vision, just a smug matron with a double chin and a middle-age spread.’³⁶ The third person narrator explains the situation as: ‘She could neither renounce nor enjoy the world of desire... For she had undergone her own transformation: She had done what a mere woman was required to do – she had accepted her fate.’³⁷ In the next narrative, Kamaluddin also fails to respect Champavati for her intellectual qualities and is unable to consider her as an autonomous human entity. Rather, for him she is nothing but an attractive female body:

Champavati is utterly enchanting. . . No regal airs, no jewelry, no make-up, no silks, and brocades. She wraps herself in an unstitched piece of cotton cloth and goes about barefoot. When I want a glass of water she brings it in a clay cup and places it on the ground, then rushes back to her cow dung plastered hut.³⁸

Champa Jan in the third narrative is also a learned woman with intellect, yet for Gautam, she is ‘a connoisseur of men [who] knew how to pick and choose’ and ‘could set men afire with a mere glance!’ according to Hari Shankar.³⁹ Yet she cannot escape her prescribed fate and finally had to live a life of misery that society assigned to a prostitute woman like her: ‘[...] [turned] into a toothless destitute, dressed in patched gharara and a quilted stole, full of holes, begging to meet her requirement of the daily dose of opium’⁴⁰ But it is her fourth reincarnation as Champa Ahmed that leads her to the path of liberation and emancipation from the oppressive shackles of gender role. Champa Ahmed is the New Woman in Sarah Grand’s sense of the word. Critics like Biswas have hailed her as the perfect feminist beacon:

[I]ndependent in spirit, [she] receives a university education, bends the conventional gender roles by taking charge of her

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social and personal life and is met with hostility from men as well as women, who consider her immoral for exhibiting her sexuality in an unbridled manner. She is able to take decisions and creates a space for her empowerment. By eluding, again and again, the compulsion to settle into domesticity with the men she loves, Champa Ahmed's rejection of the marriage proposal from Amir Reza and then Cyril Ashley represents her quest for emancipation from the patriarchal politics of restriction.⁴¹

The River of Fire also records the valorous journey of such marginalized female figures like Razia Sultan, Bibi Raji, Queen Mallik Kishwar, Begum Hazrat Mahal who had to pay a high price in their lifetime by their acts of defiance against patriarchy and consequently relegated into marginality in the male-dominated terrain of historical texts. In this context we should look at the words of Liyanage Amarakeerthi who had praised Hyder for 'make[ing] a conscious attempt to read the history of the Indian subcontinent through its women [who are] the victims and observers of [the] male [tradition of] history [that considered men] as the real agents and subjects of history.'⁴² But this epic in prose by Hyder is something more than a 'neo-historic' attempt on the part of its writer, as the novel presents a critique of the polyphonic misogynic practice of history through foregrounding female experiences.

Endnotes :

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- ² Mehru Jaffer, 'Remembering Annie Apa (Qurratulain Hyder), A Woman of Passion and Substance,' *The Citizen* (2017); www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/4/11520/Remembering-Annie-Apa-Qurratulain-Hyder-A-Woman-of-Passion-and-Substance. Accessed 19.07.19.
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- ⁷ Fatima Rizvi, 'Post-Colonialism and Marginality in the Fiction of Ismat Chughtai, Khadija Mastur, and Qurratulain Hyder,' in *Qurratulain Hyder & The River of Fire*, p.88.
- ⁸ Nikhat Taj, 'A Study of the Organising Principle(s) in Qurratulain Hyder's "River of Fire,"' *Indian Literature*, 53.4 (252) (2009):203. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23340171. Accessed 20.01.18.
- ⁹ Nikhat Taj, 'A Study of the Organising Principle(s) in Qurratulain Hyder's "River of Fire."'
- ¹⁰ Sami Rafiq, 'Representation of the Female Psyche: The Champa of Aag Ka Dariya,' in *Qurratulain Hyder & The River of Fire*, p.188.
- ¹¹ Qurratulain Hyder, *The River of Fire* (NY: New Directions, 2003), p.90.
- ¹² Rafiq, 'Representation of the Female Psyche: The Champa of Aag Ka Dariya,' p.191.
- ¹³ Rafiq, 'Representation of the Female Psyche: The Champa of Aag Ka Dariya,' p.191.
- ¹⁴ Kumkum Sangari, 'The Configural Mode: Aag Ka Dariya,' in *Qurratulain Hyder & The River of Fire*, p.261.
- ¹⁵ Sangari, 'The Configural Mode: Aag Ka Dariya,' p.261.
- ¹⁶ Hyder, *The River of Fire*, p.120.
- ¹⁷ Hyder, *The River of Fire*, p.178.
- ¹⁸ Sangari, 'The Configural Mode: Aag Ka Dariya,' p.261.
- ¹⁹ Sangari, 'The Configural Mode: Aag Ka Dariya,' p.264.
- ²⁰ Sangari, 'The Configural Mode: Aag Ka Dariya,' p.264.
- ²¹ Sami Rafiq, 'Representation of the Female Psyche: The Champa of Aag Ka Dariya,' p.192.
- ²² Qurratulain Hyder, *The River of Fire*, p.178.
- ²³ Rafiq, 'Representation of the Female Psyche: The Champa of Aag Ka Dariya,' p.193.
- ²⁴ Hyder, *The River of Fire*, p.38.

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- ²⁵ Hyder, *The River of Fire*, p.48.
- ²⁶ Hyder, *The River of Fire*, p.48.
- ²⁷ Hyder, *The River of Fire*, p.49.
- ²⁸ Pratibha Biswas, 'Qurratulain Hyder's *Aag Ka Dariya*,' *Muse India* 58 (2014) :p.7. www.museindia.com/focuscontent.asp?issid=58&id=5302. Accessed 04.01.18.
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- ³⁰ Biswas, 'Qurratulain Hyder's *Aag Ka Dariya*,' p. 8.
- ³¹ Hyder, *The River of Fire*, pp.266-267.
- ³² Rafiq, 'Representation of the Female Psyche: The Champa of Aag Ka Dariya,' p.193.
- ³³ Rafiq, 'Representation of the Female Psyche: The Champa of Aag Ka Dariya,' pp.194-195.
- ³⁴ Biswas, 'Qurratulain Hyder's *Aag Ka Dariya*,' p.3.
- ³⁵ Biswas, 'Qurratulain Hyder's *Aag Ka Dariya*,' p.5.
- ³⁶ Hyder, *The River of Fire*, p.47.
- ³⁷ Hyder, *The River of Fire*, p. 48.
- ³⁸ Hyder, *The River of Fire*, p.76.
- ³⁹ Hyder, *The River of Fire*, p. 138.
- ⁴⁰ Hyder, *The River of Fire*, p.6.
- ⁴¹ Biswas, 'Qurratulain Hyder's *Aag Ka Dariya*,' pp.5-6.
- ⁴² Liyanage Amarakeerthi, '*River of Fire* : Critiquing the Ideology of History,' p.37.